

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 305 561

CG 021 572

AUTHOR Hutchinson, Laetitia C.
TITLE How Many Parents? Support for Stepfamilies.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Counseling and Development (Boston, MA, March 15-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
-- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Family Life; *Family Problems; Family Structure; Individual Needs; Parent Child Relationship; *Social Support Groups; *Stepfamily

ABSTRACT

In today's society, there are numerous types of family structure and each tends to be known by its own stereotypical pattern. Approximately 30% of American families can be classified as stepfamilies. Stepfamilies have their own set of family dynamics and problems faced by each member of the family. An estimated 40% of second marriages end in divorce within 4 years, and this may be attributed in part to the myths on which numerous stepfamilies are based and upon which they attempt to function on a daily basis. These include the myths that: (1) stepfamilies can and should function just like a nuclear family; (2) stepfamilies are created instantly; (3) children readily adapt to stepfamily living; (4) love happens instantly; and (5) stepmothers are wicked. As one examines the stepfamily as it exists today with the increasing numbers of people involved and the high rate of failure, it becomes apparent that counselors need to become more involved and offer the support these families need. There are several ways that counselors can provide therapy for troubled stepfamilies and prevention programs for new stepfamilies. Counselors can be instrumental in setting up support groups for stepparents and providing stepfamilies with techniques to encourage them to face their problems and learn adjustment skills that will lead to healthy family functioning. (NB)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED305561

HOW MANY PARENTS? SUPPORT FOR STEPFAMILIES

Laetitia C. Hutchinson, MA NCC

CE 021572

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Laetitia C.
Hutchinson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Counseling
and Development, Boston, MA, March 15-18, 1989.

How Many Parents? ¹ Support for Stepfamilies

A facet of American life undergoing vast transformation is the family with the stepfamily rapidly becoming the more dominant form of family life in America. As family structures change, professionals need to be aware of the ramifications experienced by those individuals involved. Because many people enter a blended family retaining a feeling of failure from a former relationship, these individuals are especially vulnerable to the numerous pressures placed on them by today's society. One of the major problems encountered is the blending together of "your" children with "my" children and possibly adding "our" children. As the parents face this struggle they are in need of both professional support and support of other parents experiencing similar circumstances and struggles.

This paper is to focus on the dynamics of the stepfamily with special emphasis on problems faced by each member component of the family. Techniques to encourage stepparents to face their problems and learn adjustment skills to lead to healthy family functioning will be addressed. The need for support groups for these parents will be discussed as well as motivational and marketing ideas to ensure the success of such a group.

In today's society there are numerous types of family structure and each tends to be known by its own stereotypical pattern. Often, the view held by many people has been strongly influenced by the media with television being a major contributing factor. The basic traditional family structure is the nuclear family sometimes referred to as a "biological" or "intact" family. This type of family is portrayed on television by the Cosby Show and Family Ties. These programs show the nuclear family to be always happy and although problems occur from time to time, the cohesiveness

demonstrated by these families leads to quick solutions -- usually within the one-half hour time allotment. Partially because of this the nuclear family is seen as being the ideal. Commercials also frequently lead one to believe that the wonderfully happy family being depicted is a nuclear one as do pictures in magazine advertisements. Another fallacy adding to this idealistic idea is the fact that families we personally know have a "public facade" that always appears to "have it together." This facade fails to show the fights over the bathroom or whose turn it is to feed the dog. It is only in one's own family that one sees the true picture.

A second type of family structure is the extended family seen on television in the Walton's or Our House. Again, problems are resolved rather quickly because so many interested individuals live together. The single parent family (Silver Spoons) and the foster family (Punky Brewster) often have more problems to resolve and often the child is shown to be impudent as he has more responsibility and independence within this type of family structure. Another type of family structure is the adoptive family depicted on the screen in My Two Dads and Webster.

The type of family structure rapidly becoming the more dominant form in America is the blended family or the stepfamily. The most familiar television show of this type is The Brady Bunch.

A stepfamily is defined as a family in which children live with a remarried biological parent and a stepparent or a family in which children of a former marriage visit with their remarried parent and stepparent. Approximately 30% of American families can

be classified this way. It has been reported that eighteen million children under the age of eighteen are presently living in stepfamilies and that there are a minimum of twenty five million stepfathers and stepmothers. In the United States one million children and one-half million adults become members of a stepfamily annually. Unfortunately, an estimated forty percent of second marriages end in divorce within four years. This can be attributed in part to the myths on which numerous stepfamilies are based and attempt to function on a daily basis.

One myth is that stepfamilies can and should function just like a nuclear family. Although nuclear families certainly have their share of stress and conflict, it is of a different nature than that experienced by the blended family. One stepmother compared her family to an acting ensemble; each actor comes to play practice with his own bag of tricks and individual assessment of how each role within the production should be played. However, it is only through a great deal of practice and learning each other that everyone learns to mesh together to create a beautiful production. She also stated that one always thinks a production won't make it due to so many obstacles being in the way, but after tedious work day and night the production is a big success. Another way of comparing the nuclear family and the stepfamily is as pieces of a puzzle. The nuclear family is composed of individual family members circling a central core. The stepfamily is formed of various individuals with very different backgrounds who through much effort and trial and error learn to fit their unique beings together. To complicate matters even more are the numbers of people involved. For example in a nuclear family there may be eight people. If both parents remarry,

there may be over twenty four. This can be overwhelming.

Another myth is that a stepfamily is created instantly. The fact is becoming a stepfamily is a gradual process. Certain stages must be completed, some of which are quite difficult and chaotic, before they begin to stabilize.

The idea that children readily adapt to stepfamily living is also a myth. The children actually go through a great deal of trauma, first through the loss created by the divorce or death, and secondly by the remarriage of their parent. Conflicting and strong feelings within the child often make adjustment very confusing and difficult for him. Because of frustrations felt, the child may become resentful, sneaky and even deceitful. As they attempt to find their own identity they will manipulate others for attention, play one parent against another, and fight with their siblings. Another factor making adjustment difficult is the fact that their personalities have already been formed and remolding them to join with the needs of new family members does not come easily.

The concerns the children have as they go through the trauma and adjustments are numerous. Almost universally they feel guilt. The child must be shown that they can neither cause a divorce nor can they keep their parents together. Divorce and remarriage are strictly for adults. Almost all children also fantasize that one day their parents will re-unite and all will "live happily everafter." Specific concerns the kids may have are: with whom will they live? Must they change schools? Will there be sufficient money? Which parents "side" should they be on? Different

rules at different houses and having to be a messenger between their biological parents. The many emotions these children experience will probably include anger, hurt, loneliness, confusion, embarrassment, shame, and often relief. To deal with these feelings each child will develop their own set of coping mechanisms which often create a new set of problems. For example, they may act babyish as they seek individual attention. Alternately, they need to be taught how to ask for attention forthrightly. The child may dream about the absent parent viewing him or her as their fairy godfather/godmother. As the fantasy continues the custodial parent becomes viewed more and more negatively. Often the non-custodial parent overcompensates materialistically to relieve some of their own guilt which in turn reinforces the child's fantasy.

Possibly the most difficult myth is that love happens instantly. However, time and patience are requirements for building relationships - especially in stepfamilies due to the losses previously suffered. One must recognize that stepfamilies are formed at a time when levels of trust are low and fears are high. Not being able to instantly love new members of one's new family as has been unrealistically expected can lead to feelings of disappointment and guilt followed by anger and resentment.

That stepmothers are wicked may be the most popular myth existing today regarding blended families - possibly because it is the oldest. Our fairy tales exude of the wicked stepmom. Cinderella and Snow White show the stepmother as jealous and hostile toward her husband's children. Usually the stepmother is viewed as an intruder, and she also decreases the child's hope of reunion between his biological parents. The antithesis of this, however, is that in

order to be a successful stepmother, she must, above all, have a positive self-image. She needs to view herself as a pioneer embarking on a new frontier and put aside the negative connotation held by many. Rather than aligning her view of herself with the stepmother in Cinderella and Snow White, she must view the romantic image of the stepmother portrayed by Julie Andrews in The Sound of Music and the involved, vivacious, and caring stepmom seen in The Brady Bunch.

The two views of stepmothers, wicked stepmother as opposed to saint are important because they illustrate so well the two extremes that cause fears and fantasies of many stepmothers.

The woman who believes that making life better for others is the basis for true fulfillment and who gives for the sake of giving alone rather than seeking appreciation, will not only be happier, but will be the more successful stepmother as well. One child put it so well in his adult life when he said, "All that I am or hope to be, I owe to my angel mother." This quote is by Abraham Lincoln as he referred to the woman who became his stepmother when he was 10 years old.

The role of the stepfather often remains uncertain or ill-defined. Often his stepchildren are supported by their natural father and may even see him regularly. Nevertheless, the stereotypical role of the man in the family is to be the disciplinarian and the stepfather usually expected to help in the rearing of his wife's children. It is essential for the couple to discuss fully what his role is to be and for frequent reassessments to be scheduled for evaluation of their role expectations and the workability of their plan. Clear and

open communication in this area is imperative.

As one examines the stepfamily as it exists today with the increasing numbers of people involved and the high rate of failure, it becomes apparent that counselors need to become more involved and offer the support these families need. Therapy, of course, is often indicated in a troubled family, but how much better it would be if the prevention of stepfamily chaos could be the primary focus. There are several ways in which a prevention program can be implemented. One way is to utilize a curriculum that has already been prepared and proven effective. One such program is Strengthening Stepfamilies by American Guidance Service. The complete kit comes with leaders' guides, participant's workbook, homework packet, posters, audiocassettes and publicity materials. It is an educational program with a major focus on the importance of the marital relationship. The format is flexible, but it is basically designed to be conducted in five weekly sessions.

Another program of similar design is Learning To ~~live~~ Step Together by the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. This curriculum is divided into six sessions. The leader's guide is well-written and easy to follow. Handouts are included and are ready to photocopy for use in class. Preparation for remarriage, role expectations and communication skills are some of the topics covered.

Another option is to design one's own support group format. This may be accomplished by becoming a chapter of the Stepfamily Association of America, Inc. and meeting monthly with special programs planned. Alternately, one may wish to develop a completely independent program. Should the latter method be

chosen, it is advisable to get those interested stepparents involved and allows them a voice in the initial planning stages. It is suggested that the group meet no more frequently than bi-monthly and that children be included occasionally. Variety needs to be maintained in the program format by having guest speakers for some meetings addressing topics of interest to the participants and holding some meetings as an open forum. The open forum meetings require a qualified facilitator who allows participants to discuss problem areas currently being experienced. A mutual sharing should then ensure with participation of all present. As they share what has and has not been successful individual situations, new ideas emerge and insights occur. It is extremely advantageous for these families to share common problems recognizing they are not alone in their feelings and experiences.

Stepparents have included in their difficult job description the objective of defining roles and creating a functional family structure from the entanglement of old and new relationships. There is a long period of adjustment these stepfamilies must go through as the transition to new family roles takes place. Achieving success amid the complexity of this family system takes time, patience and support. Counselors, we must be a part of this transformation process and offer the necessary support to ensure their success.

By: Laetitia C. Hutchinson, MA, NCC